



# OHIO OPTOMETRIC ASSOCIATION

House Bill 33  
Senate Finance Committee  
Testimony of Dr. Brian Dietz  
President, Ohio Optometric Association  
Interested Party  
May 25, 2023

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 33. My name is Dr. Brian Dietz and I am an optometrist from Lima and am the current president of the Ohio Optometric Association. The OOA is the professional trade association for Ohio's doctors of optometry and we represent nearly 70% of the state's practitioners.

The OOA and its members have a long history in working to improve access to comprehensive eye care for Ohioans. Our member optometrists have delivered thousands of free eye exams and glasses to children in need of vision correction through the In-School Eye Exam or iSee program operated by our charitable foundation. Additionally, we have a public-private partnership with the Ohio Department of Health through its Save Our Sight Fund in which volunteer optometrists educate 100,000 Ohio school children each year on the importance of eye health and eye safety. This program, known as Realeyes, has been in operation for over 20 years and was the recipient of the American Public Health Association Vision Care Section's award for Outstanding Scientific Project and American Optometric Association's Apollo Award, which honors persons or organizations for distinguished service to the visual welfare of the public. Finally, the OOA operates what we believe is the only optometric student loan repayment program in the country, which assists new graduates with outstanding school debt in exchange for practicing in underserved areas, providing pro bono services, volunteering in the community and other criteria.

Even with all of these successful programs, access to vision care remains a concern in our state. The most important key for improvement is a strong Medicaid program. Ohio's optometrists participate in the Medicaid program at a high rate – between 60-70% accept Medicaid patients. I am proud to be one of those members and treat Medicaid patients in my practice on a regular basis. However, reimbursement rates have not been adjusted since 2015.

Primary eye care and vision services are paramount to assisting Medicaid recipients maintain meaningful employment and for providing pediatric recipients with the best opportunity to succeed in school. These services are especially vital to Ohio's at-risk populations. There is a strong connection between eye health and chronic health issues, including diabetes, hypertension and others. Ensuring that Medicaid recipients can obtain primary vision care services through community-based providers like optometrists, is an important component in treating and managing chronic health concerns. It can also reduce the chances of patients requiring institutionalized care or visiting costlier settings like hospital emergency rooms for treatment. Additionally, increasing access to comprehensive vision care can help the state accomplish its goal to increase literacy rates.

The OOA strongly supports Governor DeWine's proposal to raise Medicaid reimbursement rates for vision and medical eye care services provided by optometrists, and the House's action to further those increases. I encourage this committee and the Senate to maintain these important changes in the

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budget. This targeted and relatively modest investment can create a healthy and productive workforce for the future.

Children's vision issues require special attention. It is estimated that 25% of school-aged children have a vision problem that may impact their ability to learn. However, only 15% of children have had a comprehensive eye examination by the time they enter kindergarten. Furthermore, the school vision screenings required by Ohio state law lack the necessary test components to completely evaluate a child's visual skills. In fact, these screenings may miss 60 to 75% of children who have vision conditions such as binocular vision disorders or visual perceptual delays. The false sense of security provided by "passing" a vision screening lowers the sense of urgency for obtaining a comprehensive eye examination. Of the children who fail the school-administered vision screening, less than 30% receive necessary follow-up care. The low rate of follow-up care has been attributed to several factors including economic distress, lack of understanding about eye care, logistical barriers, inflexible work schedules, and unavailability of appointments.

Recognizing that Ohio's school districts have great diversity in geography, population, socioeconomic status, level of need, and other demographics, the OOA and its charitable foundation partnered with the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio and Vision To Learn to bring mobile vision care to the Appalachian region of the state. The mobile clinic is staffed by OOA member optometrists and licensed opticians and supported by the talented administrative team from Vision To Learn. This unique project was aided by the previous General Assembly with an allocation to the State Treasurer's ResultsOhio program designated for the program if it met certain metrics. We are pleased to report that the project not only met the designated metrics, it exceeded them, and has provided thousands of children in the region with the tools they need to achieve success in school and life.

Even with this success, more must be done in the region and throughout the state. With the support of funding from the General Assembly, we believe that we can duplicate the results of the Appalachian project in other areas by utilizing portable vision care equipment and providing logistical and scheduling support to school nurses and local eye doctors to provide care onsite. In addition to providing comprehensive eye care and glasses, when necessary, the program helps establish a relationship between the child and the local eye doctor to create a pathway to a lifetime of care.

The OOA respectfully requests the subcommittee consider an appropriation in the amount of up to \$2.5 million over the biennium for the purpose of expanding the In-School Eye Exam (iSee) program to all regions of the state.

Should the legislature move forward with both initiatives discussed above – Medicaid reimbursement increases, and an appropriation to expand the iSee program – Ohio will lead the nation in addressing children's vision needs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 33 and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.